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TOMORROW'S CITIES:

BY THE POOR, FOR THE POOR

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Do not look for the city of the future in science fiction novels. You have only to go to Manila, Lusaka, San Salvador or other Third World cities to see it being shaped from meagre resources by the imagination and sweat of the poor. A glance will tell you that this city of the future bears no resemblance whatsoever to the automated glass and steel creations of futurists.

"I'm afraid to say," states Dr A.A. Laquian, Professor at the University of the Philippines and an expert on urban questions, "that the poor will have to build their own cities. They will also have to collect their own garbage, sweep their own streets, and be their own policemen and firemen."

Because of a phenomenal migration of the rural poor to the cities, the poor are coming to constitute the majority of the urban population in developing countries. If the present rate of urbanization continues, it is predicted that in the year 2000, of the 52 cities that will have a population of more than 5 million, 40 will be in the Third World. Unable to generate the surplus necessary to construct cities designed for the rich, most of the new city dwellers will have no choice but to build and run their cities themselves.

However, this trend leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of politicians and dashes many fond hopes. Heads of state would prefer to inaugurate lovely

avenues of bungalows, and heads of households, poor as they may be, still dream of a home to fill them with pride. All that the "sites and services" programs promise the poor is the renovation of their slums, a serviced lot, or the shell of a small house.

Three-quarters of the inhabitants of the Third World countries cannot afford housing now being built by the private sector. Some manage to find lodgings through public loan programs and low-rent construction projects. But for millions fresh from the country, the precariousness of their financial situation bars them from any access to official housing programs. Their only choice is to build makeshift dwellings on illegally occupied land — become squatters — or to crowd into slums.

Ignoring the problem is not a solution, so some municipal authorities have taken an innovative approach, first by making better located lots available to squatters, then by equipping the lots with sanitary services and electricity. Experience has helped them refine the serviced lot projects to the point of making them a worthwhile solution to the problem of housing the poor. Now there are dozens of sites with a whole range of services, from a simple vacant lot to a small, permanent house. Indiscriminately razing slums to the ground has also stopped. After years of agonizing deliberation as to whether it was reasonable to base community development on slums, planners decided to grant loans for renovation and to bring water, sewers, and electricity to shantytowns. These programs constitute a realistic way of bringing essential services to poor city dwellers and a very efficient method of integrating fringe populations with the rest of the society.

In the face of these achievements, the World Bank began supporting such projects in the early 1970s. For its part, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), of Canada, saw these projects as opportunities to train researchers from developing countries in the field of urban planning. The IDRC and the World Bank decided to jointly finance groups of researchers from the Third World who would assess the projects under way in their countries. In October 1979, the Sixth IDRC-World Bank Conference on the Monitoring and Evaluation of Urban Development Projects was held in Ottawa, attended by researchers and project administrators.

Of all the sites and services projects discussed, several of the most successful were located in El Salvador, a small, populous Central American country. A private organization, the Fundacion Salvadorena de Desarrollo y Vivienda Minima (Salvadoran Foundation for Development and Low-cost Housing), administers a very ambitious program there, and it uses its construction projects to offer maximum possibilities for slum dwellers to become full-fledged members of the community. Its philosophy is based on mutual aid, which unites families in all kinds of community work, and on the principle of gradual improvement. Mr Mauricio Silva, project manager at the Fundacion, estimates that his agency's projects represent nearly 30 percent of the houses built in El Salvador. Last fall 12 000 units were under construction.

The houses in the Salvadoran program are built on new sites at the outskirts of cities. Although it is very popular, the program requires purchasing land that inflation and speculation are making increasingly expensive. It also requires that municipal authorities rearrange their priorities, as they must suddenly extend municipal services. Setting new priorities in this way is not easy. Occasionally a site is not connected to the water system until a year and a half after it has been occupied.

The increasing costs of extending services — electricity, transportation, water and sewer — to the new sites have forced planners to seek alternative solutions. A policy of restoring existing structures has become necessary because, in spite of their precariousness, slum dwellings frequently offer the advantage of being close to employment and require less investment in terms of land.

In the bustling Manila neighbourhood of Tondo, the largest shantytown in Southeast Asia, 27 500 families are crowded onto 137 hectares. Here the policy of renovating slum dwellings has perhaps been put to the real test.

The first problem to be resolved was the illegal occupation of the land by the squatters. Since they lived under the perpetual threat of expulsion, it was unrealistic to expect them to invest in their lodgings. Officials began by dividing sections of the shantytown into parcels of

30 to 90 metres square, that they sold for less than a dollar per square metre, payable over 25 years. Next, they presented the population with three possible ways of rationalizing land use. The first changed the arrangement of the structures only slightly, the second involved moving 25 to 50 percent of the houses, and the third required moving up to 75 percent of them.

To the great surprise of the authorities, the squatters have most often chosen the third option because it offers the most harmonious arrangement of lots, provides a better road system, and allows maximum space for schools and markets. Once the land-use plan is accepted, contractors do the major work on water mains and sewers. However, the population itself decides the assignment of lots and there is no shortage of able bodies when the time comes to move structures. By the summer of 1979, 3000 units had been renovated and 20 percent of the homes had been transformed into elegant little two-storey houses of concrete blocks.

The World Bank is now financing many low-cost housing projects besides those in El Salvador and the Philippines. The very first one was launched in Dakar, Senegal, in 1970, but it got off to a rather slow start. After 9 years, construction has begun on only 2500 of the 10 500 available lots, and barely 200 families are living in their homes. In Lusaka, Zambia, however, another sites and services project was highly successful. In four years some 7600 homes had been built at an average cost of \$825.

Through the cooperative efforts of the IDRC and the World Bank, these projects have been thoroughly assessed. At last October's meeting, with representatives of Indonesia, Kenya, Panama, and Colombia looking on, the researchers and administrators were able to begin sketching an overall picture of their experiences.

There was a very clear consensus in favour of public participation. In El Salvador especially, the results proved that from a strictly economic point of view, the mutual aid system reduced construction costs by \$400 to \$600, which is 50 percent of the cost of building a small house. Even if participation in community work entails loss of income, the families feel that this loss is easily offset by the opportunity of obtaining a home they could never afford otherwise.

It seems that the important factor is that families who will have to live together in the new or improved neighbourhood have the opportunity to get to know one another by working together. Once a community spirit has been firmly established, municipal authorities feel that the loans will be paid back more quickly, so that funds will be available to launch other projects.

One of the researchers' main concern was that the poor might eventually be bought out by the upper classes. Fortunately, these fears are unfounded in most cases. In the Philippines and El Salvador, studies show that the population in serviced lot areas is more stable, so the poor are not being forced out because of the improvements made. In Zambia, however, a growing number of occupants have twice the income of those for whom the project was designed. Representatives of the World Bank feel that the situation will resolve itself as the number of available units increases.

Assessing the impact of the projects tests the imagination of the researchers. Some physical improvements speak for themselves, but how does one translate into statistics the claims of Tondo residents that, for example, crime has decreased, or that they are more tolerant toward one another? Zambian authorities insist that the health of families is improving, but they have not succeeded in showing this. One thing is certain, however: municipal authorities see the demand for urban services increase suddenly with the servicing of sites.

Mr Anthony Churchill, director of the urban projects department of the World Bank, told participants that the sites and services formula, whether it involves renovated slums or serviced sites, had proved itself. The Bank hopes that in the near future more than five million people will find homes through these projects. However, Mr Churchill admitted this will still represent a fraction of the one billion additional citizens Third World cities must shelter between 1975 and the year 2000.

On the project sites — which, whether we like it or not, are the blueprints of tomorrow's cities — the houses cost on average less than \$2000. They occupy a site averaging 32 square metres in Tondo, 74 square metres in

El Salvador, and 350 square metres in Africa. The monthly payments made by house owners vary from \$10 to \$15, and the monthly payments on loans for renovations rarely exceed \$1 or \$2. Furthermore, without having recourse to costly high-rises, projects are sure of attaining economical densities and preserving precious arable land simply by encouraging construction of two- or three-storey houses.

In spite of the fact that the sites and services projects have dealt a cruel blow to many cherished dreams, there is a great promise for the future: in building their own cities the poor will perhaps form strong, dynamic communities. As long as they do not become caught up in the pursuit of solely personal gain, but take their society in hand, the poor will make of each low-cost housing project the seeds of change for urban poor.

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